

Back to the Basics: The Great Commission

Deuteronomy 5:22–33; Matthew 28

The title of my message this morning is “Back to the Basics: The Great Commission.”

We have two Scripture texts today. In the first, Moses recounts how God spoke to him and told him what he was to teach the Israelites. The second is our Lord’s Great Commission, given to the church before his ascension up to heaven. The aspect we’ll focus on in the Great Commission is the importance of obeying *everything* God commands. As we shall see, this is not just for individuals, but for churches too.

1. A striking parallel

I want you to notice the striking parallel between the closing verses of our Old Testament and New Testament texts:

Our Old Testament text has God telling Moses: “But as for you, stand here by Me, and I will speak to you all the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments which you shall *teach* them, that they may observe them in the land which I am giving them to possess.” In response, Moses tells the people: “Therefore you shall be careful to *do as the LORD your God has commanded you*; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left” (Deut. 5:31–32).

Our New Testament text has: “Go ye therefore, and *teach* all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to *observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you*: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matt. 28:19–20).

Note that both texts instruct the church to “teach” God’s people to “do” or “observe” the things that God has commanded. The Matthew text specifies to observe “*all things*” that Christ—God in human flesh—has commanded—*all* things!

Let the significance of this sink in for a moment. *It is God’s intention that people*—that is, all the people he created—*obey “all” his commandments, “not turning aside to the right hand or to the left.”* This is a universal duty, incumbent upon every man, woman and child on the face of the earth. The God of heaven requires perfect obedience to his holy law. To fail to do that is to sin, and the fact is that every man, woman and child in the world is a sinner. “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”

God clearly intends that every person in the world keep all his commandments—every one. He doesn’t have a higher standard for some and a lesser standard for others. Every one of us, no matter where we live—no matter our parentage, our upbringing, our culture, our training, our personality, our religion, the way we see ourselves, or any other factor—is morally required to keep *all* God’s commandments. The God of heaven requires this. This is true for everyone,

whether they agree with it or whether they disagree with it; it does not matter. We are all required to obey *all* things that God has commanded. This is an acknowledgment that *God*—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three Persons, one God—is the Lord. His word rules. Man’s chief end—just by being human—is to glorify God by delighting in him, fellowshipping with him, enjoying his smile, seeking his approval. *God* gets to make the rules, and the rules he makes are for our own good. The Bible is clear: we are to obey God rather than men. Our moral duty is to seek the God of heaven, find out what he requires, and put it into practice every day of our life. We are to meditate upon the Holy Scriptures, reorientate our thinking in light of the Holy Scriptures, become God’s willing worshipers. That is our duty. Whatever else we may pursue must be secondary. We are to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. In other words, we must become Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, members of his heavenly kingdom.

Now some people may not agree with this. The world will not approve. People around us may think us weird. No matter! Obeying God is paramount. All of us, but especially God’s people—those who confess Christ—need to be taught to obey God. We must obey instinctively—every time! The God of heaven doesn’t give commandments to torment us, but to bless us. Hear God plead, as we read in our Old Testament text this morning: “Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, *that it might be well with them and with their children forever!*” But though the heart of man intuitively knows that this is true, he fights against it. He doesn’t want to give up his autonomy. The Christ-follower fights against this urge. He understands that such is the essence of sin. He resists it. He puts it to death. He truly wants God to be in charge. He voluntarily submits. He recognizes that rebellion is sin.

Think of disciplining an unruly toddler. He grasps a forbidden item in his hand and refuses to give it up. His parent says, “Let me have that,” but he grasps it tighter. The parent, clearly frustrated, says again, “Let me have that,” but the toddler says, “No!” It is a battle of the wills. Each side stakes out its position. The parent threatens, or promises a reward, but the toddler is intransigent. He is convinced, deep down inside, that he is right, and that everyone in the world, including his parents, ought to recognize that. The parent explains how it will go better for him if he obeys, but the toddler remains unconvinced. Even if the parent forcibly removes the item from the toddler’s hand, he still resists. He screams and throws a fit and feels as though he has been violated. Everyone in the world ought to recognize that *he* (or *she*) is in charge!—so he thinks.

We are that toddler. As long as we think that *we*, not the God of heaven, are sovereign, we are in rebellion against God. That is the essence of sin.

The Bible makes the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. All men are sinners. All fall short of the glory of God. We fail to meet up to his standard of

absolute perfection. As Jesus plainly put it, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” No exceptions! According to the Lord Jesus, those who are born again, whose hearts are changed by the supernatural working of God’s Holy Spirit, go to heaven. Those who are *not* born again, who are *not* changed by the supernatural working of the Spirit, die in their sins and go to spend eternity in hell. There is no middle ground, no halfway. Without the intervention of God’s sovereign Holy Spirit, we are destined at the end to hear his righteous sentence “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.” That is not a pleasant thought, but it is the truth, and it points out the urgency of being ready for Christ’s appearing. Lost sinners need to get right with God. They need to confess their sins. They need to flee to him and say, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I have been wrong. I have been living for self, living for the pleasures of this world. I have excluded you from my life. I have failed to surrender to you as Lord. I have been doing things that displease you. I have, as it were, spit in your face and told you, the Lord God Almighty, to get lost, to stop bothering me, to leave me alone. I now see how wrong I have been. I have offended the God of absolute holiness, the God who *is*, the God who is love, the God who gave his only Son to die for sinners. I deserve your wrath. I deserve to burn in the bottomless pit forever and ever. But I cast myself on your mercy. I believe your promise: ‘Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ O Lord, have mercy upon me and save me now, for Jesus’ sake. You are my only hope. I am yours—forever.”

So here is the striking parallel in our Old and New Testament texts. Both the Old and New Testaments show that the church’s commission is to teach men and women, boys and girls, to obey God’s every commandment, to bring all our thinking and all our doing into conformity with God’s word. If we do this, it will go well for us. If we fail to do this, there will be hell to pay—literally.

But let’s tease this out a bit. Let’s see, secondly, that

2. We must obey individually and corporately.

There are two ways that we need to be taught: to obey individually, and to obey corporately. As individuals, we need to learn how to live in the calling that each one of us has received from God—as singles, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, children, etc.: control our tongue, bring every thought into obedience to Christ, meditate on his word, seek to bring ourselves and everything under our authority—our minds, bodies, families, businesses, relationships; whether at home, work, school, play, wherever, into obedience to Christ. As Paul said, “I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection” (1 Cor. 9:27). Other translations have “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection,” “I discipline my body and keep it under control.” “I discipline my body and make it my slave,” Here is our duty as individuals—all of us. Christ is Lord, and we are to live that out in our personal

lives. I personally can say, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” I don’t have that authority over my neighbor’s house. I can talk to him, reason with him, share Christ with him, and urge him to bring his house under Christ’s authority, but I don’t have direct authority over him or his house.

In John 21, Jesus said to Peter, “Follow Me.” The next thing we see is that “Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following.” This was the apostle John, the writer of the Gospel. Here was Peter’s fellow disciple, his peer, his equal. “Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, ‘But Lord, what about this man?’” Peter’s first inclination was to ask about his neighbor. Jesus’ answer was instructive: “If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.” Peter’s responsibility was, first of all, over his own personal life.

And so it is for all of us. The church, in obedience to Christ, teaches us to obey God—that is, all God’s commands, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left—and as individuals, we put this into practice in our own personal life, at school, at work, and in every area over which we have authority.

But what about the church? Is it not also true that the church itself is to observe all that Christ has commanded? How can the church, which is to teach and admonish every man to observe all that Christ has commanded, not obey corporately?

The church’s responsibility is to teach everything that is in the Bible, and nothing that is not in the Bible. Not every church does this, but every church is duty-bound to do it, and to fail to do it is corporate sin. That is the church’s duty, the law-word of our King: “be careful to do as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” Here is the King’s commission for his church. The true church teaches and practices everything that her King commands. It’s as simple as that. (The principle is simple, but putting it into practice is not always quite so simple.) So the true church puts into practice all her King commands. No church on earth does this perfectly, but it ought to be the church’s intention. Every church ought to be constantly reforming, constantly endeavoring to put this into practice—constantly and self-consciously and intentionally going over all its practice, putting it under a microscope, as it were, and asking, “Why do we do this? Can we justify what we are doing from Scripture? Is there scriptural warrant for this?” If there is, then we ought to do it intentionally, joyfully, consistently, in obedience to Christ. After all, *he* is Lord, and he has the right to tell the church how it is to operate. The church has no right to tell her Lord, “Sorry, this is how we’ve always done it, and we’re going to continue doing it, whether there is scriptural warrant or not.”

Every church on the face of the earth ought to be doing this, self-consciously, constantly. The church ought to be reformed according to the Word of God, and

constantly reforming—seeking to bring all its worship and practice into conformity with the Lord of the church, speaking through Holy Scripture. This is how things are done in heaven. The Bible teaches that as the church worships here on earth, we are surrounded by “a great cloud of witnesses”—the saints and angels, the cherubim and seraphim and all the principalities and powers in heavenly places. Everything in heaven is done according to the express command of Christ himself—everything! There is no deviation in heaven from Christ’s command. Once, long ago, Lucifer, the prince of the angels, rebelled against God and was cast down to the earth, becoming the devil (slanderer) and Satan (the Adversary). He spoke to Eve through the serpent in the garden, tempting her to eat the forbidden fruit and give it to Adam, her husband, who also ate. This was a great tragedy, but God allowed it to happen so that he could be glorified in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, who himself was victorious over Satan and, being tempted by him, did *not* give in, but remained faithful to the Father. “For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.”¹

But that happened *once*, and will never happen again. Rest assured, *everything* in heaven is done according to God’s command. There is no rebellion in heaven. All those who die without Christ are forever excluded from heaven. They go to the Lake of Fire, prepared for the Devil and his Angels. There will be no rebels in heaven, but only saints who delight to do the Father’s will. The church in heaven is always and only dedicated to do the Father’s will.

But what about the church on earth? If the church in heaven is faithful, then should not the church on earth be faithful? *Of course* it is to be faithful!

Christ the Lord came to earth not only to save a people, but to incorporate them into his church. He declared, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

3. Applications

Some people think that they can be true followers of Christ and yet never become part of the visible church. But to hold that opinion is really the same as saying, “Christ came to build his church, but I want nothing to do with it.” It is ultimately to call into question the wisdom of Christ. It is to say, “Christ, you made a mistake when you instituted the church. You needn’t have done that. You should have done differently.” But shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, “Why hast thou made me thus?”² Do we—mere humans—have a right to call into question the perfect plan of Almighty God? Christ said, “I will build my church.” The church is the kingdom of Christ—the place where Christ rules. He rules in his church by his Word and Spirit. In the New Testament, those who gladly received the word were baptized and became part of the visible church—now worldwide,

¹ Heb. 2:18

² Rom. 9:20

scattered across the face of the globe, gathered into local congregations under godly elders called by Christ, approved by the church, ordained to special office, exercising leadership as undershepherds under the headship of Christ the Chief Shepherd. If you don't want to be a member of the church, it is the same as saying you don't want to be a member of Christ. The church is Christ's body on earth, and we who confess him and are baptized are his members. The Bible says, "Obey them that have the oversight of you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give accounts."³ Clearly God intended that those who have oversight personally know the individuals over whom they have oversight, and those who are overseen know who are their elders. In other words: church membership. The members of Christ—his lambs—are gathered into flocks, overseen by faithful shepherds on behalf of the Chief Shepherd. If you confess Christ, then you have a biblical responsibility to be examined by the elders of the church and received into the body—formal church membership.

I am aware that such teaching is not popular in a society that values personal autonomy and rugged individualism, but what should dictate our behavior, society or Christ? Clearly, Christ! Every one who names his name and confesses him as Savior should say, "Yes, Lord. I will obey. I don't want to be independent but under your fatherly authority, in submission to your will. Forgive me for my independent spirit. I am yours—body and soul, both now and forever. I will take my place in your church." And churches that don't practice biblical church membership and shepherd their members are being disobedient to Christ. There are plenty of churches that serve the Lord's supper to people that have no intention of submitting themselves to a particular church. This is no minor matter. It is actually scandalous—outright rebellion against the authority of Christ the Lord—and ought to be rectified at once. To continue in the status quo is outright disobedience to Christ the Head.

And what about the church's worship? The church's worship should be filled with God's word. The word of Christ should dwell in us richly in all wisdom. It should be in our mouths and on our lips. It should be sung and recited and spoken in the church's worship. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."⁴ Is this not the Word of God? Is it not part of "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you"? It is not a hard saying. It is not obscure. It is the command of Christ, and it is to be obeyed. Why don't churches obey it?

Can a church say, "We don't want to sing Psalms and hymns. If we do that, then people will not want to come. It is more important to attract people than to obey

³ Heb. 13:17, Geneva Bible (1560)

⁴ Col. 3:16

Christ, the Lord of the church”? Can a church say that and be a faithful church? Do we want our worship to be attractive to *God*, or attractive to *a world in rebellion against God*? This is why Grace OPC sings the Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs that have been sung by the church since earliest times—songs that were written for congregational singing—not performance music (frequently led by women and unordained men). It’s not hard to do. Every church can do it, but few do. Is there any other church in Lansing that does this?

The bottom line: the church must get back to the basics, specifically, our Lord’s Great Commission. Are we observing “all things” that Christ commanded? Or are we excluding things that might not be popular, or that unbelievers might find unfamiliar or offensive?

Church of Jesus Christ, be careful to do all that the LORD your God has commanded you. Do not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. Hear the word of Christ: “observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. If you do, you will have my promise: lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world. Amen.”